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2018-10

## On the Front Lines: The Role of PIOs in Emergency Responses

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Friedman, Mitchell. "On the Front Lines: The Role of POIs in Emergency Responses." Strategies and Tactics. 2018.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/61097>

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# On the Front Lines: The Role of PIOs in Emergency Responses

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*Strategies & Tactics* — Current Issue | *Strategies & Tactics*  
— October 2018 Issue

STRATEGIES  
& TACTICS

By Mitchell Friedman

## **0 Comments**

October 2, 2018

During my nearly two decades as a PR practitioner, I had little experience working with public-sector organizations. My understanding of the challenges PR pros faced in those environments was nonexistent. I knew little about the maze of regulations, the web of relationships inside and outside their organizations, or the intense scrutiny they attempted to navigate every day.

Fast-forward to the present: I now teach at a business school that's part of the federal government, to students who come from the U.S. military and public-sector organizations. The assignment has led me to reflect on how my own PR experiences intersect with working in the public sector.

Add to this mélange my interest in crisis communications, and I find myself exploring how PR professionals in the public sector represent their organizations in life-and-death circumstances. Such emergencies are far removed from anything I ever managed or even contemplated as a PR practitioner.

For example, in Northern California we see firefighters, police officers and others working to save lives and minimize the losses that wildfires cause for residents and businesses. These trained, dedicated professionals serve as first responders and bear enormous responsibilities.



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Communicators also make vital contributions to these emergency-response teams. As public-information officers (PIOs), they gather, verify, coordinate and disseminate information on all aspects of emergencies. In so doing, they also provide lifelines to their communities by delivering news and information to those affected by wildfires.

## Communications objectives

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To better understand the role of PIOs in emergency responses, I completed a local training program for emergency-response volunteers in San Francisco and online emergency-management courses offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I've also studied academic and practitioner-oriented publications that explore different aspects of a PIO's work.

One of the first things I noticed was that an emergency's immediate aftermath is especially critical. PIOs are under pressure to respond rapidly and accurately — even as the situation changes from moment to moment.

In his book of the same name, crisis-emergency expert Doug Levy refers to this initial response period as “The Communications Golden Hour.” It's when the scale of the emergency must be determined, messages need to be refined and tailored for individual audiences, and appropriate spokespeople assigned. Finally, the optimal mix of communications tools is employed.

Levy emphasizes the need to identify the single, overriding communications objective during a crisis, which becomes the touchstone for all future communications related to the emergency.

I learned that PIOs share details with stakeholders on the resources committed during emergencies. They also promote community preparedness and deliver official statements to support it. In emergencies, PIOs might also bring disparate groups together and resolve conflicts.

Effective PIOs assume varied responsibilities during emergencies, tasks that often require different skill-sets and additional training than their normal routines demand. Given the high stakes, there's little margin for error.

## Government frameworks

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As I probed further, I found little academic research on the role of public-information officers in emergencies. So I decided to keep looking.

I learned that in emergency situations, PIOs often participate in the federal government's Joint Information System, which coordinates communication among different government agencies. It's part of the National Incident Management System, which was mandated in 2003 by a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Presidential Directive.

The National Incident Management System provides a framework to help agencies respond to emergencies, regardless of their cause, size or complexity. The system lays out concepts, principles, terminologies and technologies for individuals overseeing emergency responses. It describes how different participating agencies should coordinate their efforts, and stipulates how information is collected, tracked and reported.

After the lead agency activates the Joint Information System in an emergency, it then identifies media contacts, specific media procedures and ways to distribute messages. PIOs working within the Joint Information System also must identify and gain access to technical experts who can provide crucial information to be communicated about specific crises and their related risks.

More broadly, the Joint Information System also communicates about the emergency with varied groups that include local, state and federal elected officials and their staffs; non-governmental organizations; volunteer groups; and local businesses.

The system also develops, recommends and executes plans and strategies on behalf of the incident commander, who oversees the entire emergency-response effort. The incident commander must formally approve all information used in news releases, talking points, fact sheets, official statements, brochures, audio, video and websites. The lead PIO also advises the incident commander on how to respond to rumors and inaccurate information.

In short, the Joint Information System aims to be flexible, modular and adaptable. It's designed to help PIOs respond to whatever they might encounter in emergency situations.

Still, several questions came to my mind: How do PIOs navigate this federal framework during emergencies? Does the system inhibit their ability to function – and if so, how? What actions do PIOs take to mitigate the impact of any challenges? To find answers, I undertook a research project that included interviews with PIOs throughout California.

## Common perspectives

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To date, I've spoken with communicators who work for agencies involved in law enforcement, public health and housing, and county government, among other areas. While their experiences differ, they shared some common perspectives on their roles in emergency responses:

- PIOs value training on the National Incident Management System and the Joint Information System for themselves, their staff and others involved with emergency responses.
- Experience with the National Incident Management System during real emergencies helps PIOs better understand the system's intricacies.
- They prioritize the need to build relationships with their peers and emergency-response personnel in advance of emergencies. Such relationships enable them to work collaboratively while also shaping the federal system to meet their needs. Formal and informal networks of PIOs facilitate these relationships, while staff turnover challenges them.

These observations only scratch the surface of what lurks in my body of interview data. I look forward to sharing it all.

Given the life-and-death stakes involved in emergencies such as California's wildfires, I hope PIOs will welcome these findings and use them to improve their ability to work in some of the most challenging environments I can imagine.

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